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SUBJECT: BREAKFAST WITH ROGOZIN: TALES OF A KREMLIN PROJECT

Classified By: PolMinCouns Alice G. Wells: 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: As the political season commences, the rise and fall of former Rodina Party Chairman Dmitry Rogozin is a cautionary tale for other politicians seeking poster-boy status in Kremlin electoral projects and a timely reminder of the ability of the Presidential Administration to intervene in the political process. One of Russia's most charismatic, clever, and potentially dangerous politicians, Rogozin is frustrated by his sojourn in the political wilderness -- which he attributed to his unsettling success in attracting voters, Orange revolution-era praise of Ukrainian President Yushchenko, and gullibility in taking on Moscow Mayor Luzhkov -- and is looking for a way back, through the nationalist trump card of Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltics, and frozen conflicts. End Summary

Putin's Pet

¶2. (C) In conjunction with the September 8 release of his book, "Enemy of the Nation," former Rodina party chairman Dmitry Rogozin hit the publicity circuit, deigning to breakfast with us as one stop on his presumed path to political redemption. Six months following his forced removal from the party's leadership after a racist television advertisement culminated in Rodina's exclusion from seven out of eight regional ballots, Rogozin was hardly contrite as he fed us his version of his Kremlin-propelled career arc:

-- a self-declared "Putin project," Rogozin came to the President's attention in 2002 while working on the transit rights of Russian citizens in Kaliningrad, in his capacity as Chairman of the Duma's International Relations Committee. Putin, who liked Rogozin's rhetorical punch and political effectiveness, offered his leadership of United Russia, but settled on Rogozin's spearheading of Rodina in 2003, as a leftist political combination that would bleed support from the Communists and Zhirinovsky.

-- to the alarm of the Kremlin, Rogozin's blend of Russian chauvinism and great power nationalism proved "shockingly" effective and Rodina had the misfortune of garnering "too many votes," attracting 150,000 members in six months (sic), and shooting up to second place in the opinion polls and party fundraising -- second only to Putin and United Russia, despite a lack of access to administrative resources. Wistfully recalling his popularity, Rogozin savored one particular live television debate conducted in prime-time ("they learned; they don't do that anymore"), in which he purportedly cleaned the clocks of his United Russia counterpart.

-- misreading the political tea leaves and disturbed by his visit to Beslan in the aftermath of the terrorist 2004

takeover of the school, Rogozin called then-Ukrainian presidential candidate Yushchenko and praised "on human terms" his public condolence over the loss of life. This, followed by his November 2004 visit to Kiev, donning of an orange scarf, public embrace with Yushchenko, and increasingly strident criticism of Putin's failed policy toward the orange revolution, Rogozin claims, was the last nail in his political coffin.

-- forgetting that he was on a leash, Rogozin began to stray too far and ultimately crossed Kremlin redlines, to the anger of Putin. Believing that he was an opposition politician, he began to take, and even savor, opportunistic pot-shots at the President and to adopt crowd-pleasing tactics such as his February 2005 ten-day hunger strike to protest the cutting of social subsidies. This, Carnegie analyst Dmitry Trenin told us, was Rogozin's real sin: he stopped playing at being an opposition politician and started acting like one.

Fall from Grace

13. (C) Rogozin's account of his fall from political grace, as self-serving, was by his account equally Kremlin-driven:

-- Kremlin anger over Rogozin's agenda and tactics translated into orders to intimidate and injure Rodina's supporters. Swearing that one misanthrope was released from jail for 24-hours solely for the purpose of attacking the party's Volgograd leader with an axe, in exchange for a reduced sentence, Rogozin said the authorities' message was unambiguous, particularly when followed by other assaults on family members of the party leadership and threats to Rogozin's wife and son.

-- Governors and other regional powerbrokers had "friendly" conversations with Rodina politicians, spelling out the consequences of Rogozin's continued chairmanship of the party. The specter of other strong-arm tactics -- including stripping Rodina of its name and disqualifying its registration -- were raised.

-- Defacto barred from television, Rogozin maintained that it was the government-influenced mass media that worked overtime to create the image of Rogozin as a pro-Hitler, anti-US, "monster" inciting skinhead attacks. The infamous advertisement run during the Moscow city elections implicitly disparaging people "of Caucasian nationality" and promoting "Russia for Russians" was, he first insisted, really about sanitary conditions in the capital. When criticized by us for inciting ethnic tensions, Rogozin took a different tack and said he had been encouraged by the Kremlin to take on Moscow Mayor Luzhkov where he was vulnerable -- illegal immigration. Luzhkov won. While Rogozin railed against the Mayor's corrupt practices, he grudgingly admired his chutzpah in having Liberal Democratic Party leader (and outspoken xenophobe) Zhirinovskiy lead the charge against Rodina in the courts that ultimately led to the party's disqualification in seven of eight regional elections.

Courting Public Opinion

14. (SBU) Rogozin told us of his continued desire to be a player, but, he insisted, not in a toothless parliamentary body. The answer, he maintained, was to kick-start a social movement based on Great Slav unity, which in separate press interviews he articulated as promoting the union of Russia and Belarus, the right of dual citizenship in Ukraine, the protection of ethnic Russian minorities in the Baltics, and the cause of the frozen conflicts. Mikhail Demurin, head of Rodina's International Department, elaborated to us the party's dissatisfaction over the "corporate" foreign policy espoused by the Kremlin. Rather than split the wealth among insiders, he said, Rodina believed that Russia should be prepared to pay a price -- in subsidized oil and gas, and other preferential trade and security regimes -- to maintain

influence over former republics. While Rogozin sits outside the party structure for "tactical considerations," he affirmed to us that he would continue to throw his weight behind Rodina and its nationalist agenda.

15. (C) More neutral observers testify to Rodina's -- and specifically Rogozin's -- electoral drawing power. Golos Director Lilia Shebanova told us that despite Rogozin's sidelining, the party has by Russian standards a deep bench of energetic regional representatives. Rogozin's blend of nationalism and chauvinism, while alienating a strata of the elite, generated a stable bedrock of support. Shebanova and political representatives across the spectrum predicted Rodina's reelection to the Duma, with or without a merger. Demurin noted that Rodina's 11 percent placement in the one republic that it was permitted to contest elections was achieved despite ethnic Russians constituting less than half the population. Carnegie's Trenin predicted that Rogozin's social movement would not amount to much, but did leave the deposed party leader well-positioned to leave political limbo when the next opportunity presented itself.

Comment

16. (C) Rogozin is clinical when discussing tactics for resurrecting his public profile and political standing, and lacks any of the fervor typically associated with the nationalist wing in Russia. He shrugged off our concern over his track record and agenda: this was politics, not personal. His ability to find a local publisher, albeit one that specializes in xenophobic and anti-Semitic literature (a sampling: "Masons in Power in Russia," "For Motherland! For Stalin!", "Judaic Yoke") indicates that he is not beyond the Kremlin's political pale. By rededicating himself to "patriotic" causes, Rogozin clearly hopes to become a player in the 2007-2008 election campaigns and (as his purported effort to curry favor with the Kremlin by challenging Luzhkov demonstrates) is not picky about which camp he occupies, as long as it provides a visible political berth.

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